

INTRODUCTION

A full and detailed review of the work of Joseph Harris, the Francis Lee Higginson Professor of English Literature and Professor of Folklore at Harvard University, would be a scholarly and critical project well worth undertaking, but it is not one we propose here. In this volume we have chosen to limit our own words in order to make more room for the work of Joseph Harris. We are confident that the scholarly community will approve our decision, although the choice of which of Joe's articles to reprint will inevitably be more controversial. In making that difficult choice, we debated between ourselves and with wise counselors over two models for a collection honoring the work of a distinguished scholar such as Joseph Harris. We could either choose a representative sample that would reflect the breadth of his work in Old-Norse Icelandic, or gather articles situated within a topical range. After a good deal of debate and considerable consulting, we opted for a representative sample in order to make a range of Joe's work more readily available to students and scholars who do not have easy access to a research library with extensive holdings in the field of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. To some degree we have attempted to choose less accessible papers rather than those which are more widely accessible, but we have also attempted to put together a coherent collection of Joseph Harris's work.



In his years of work at Harvard, Stanford, Cornell, and then Harvard again, Joseph Harris has established himself as one of the most important contemporary scholars in the fields of Old English and Old Norse–Icelandic. His work is characterized by deep learning, openness to the best of both new and old scholarship and criticism, and a kind of judicious balance in dealing with complex problems.

There is a long tradition of scholarly inquiry concerning oral literature and oral tradition at Harvard, extending back to Francis James Child’s work on the English and Scottish popular ballad, and continuing with Parry’s and Lord’s work on South Slavic traditional poetry, B. J. Whiting’s work on medieval English proverbs, and Francis P. Magoun’s elaboration of the oral formulaic hypothesis to explicate some of the more puzzling features of Old English poetry. Although Joseph Harris’s work is certainly in this tradition, he has always articulated a moderated and nuanced version of oral theory as this line of research is currently defined. Whereas Magoun was concerned with setting Old English poetry completely apart from later developments in English literature and in effect reducing the various poets to being simply voices of tradition, Joe has always been sensitive to the differences of individual talent and to the literary quality of the texts he was studying. The result has been a mode of criticism that reflects the importance and fascination of oral traditional literature and is simultaneously sensitive to individual poetic achievement. There is no question that certain genres of medieval (and post-medieval) literature reflect the influence of pre-existing oral literary forms. Genres such as the traditional English and Scottish ballads, the Icelandic sagas (and *þættir*) and the Old English elegies are either oral literature directly (as are the ballads) or draw upon traditional oral forms that must have existed but have not been explicitly preserved. Criticism of these genres has sometimes oscillated between simply ignoring the oral antecedents of the texts we have and romantically invoking “orality” as a concept that somehow explains the survival of these oral traditions in very diverse literary forms.

The work of Joseph Harris mediates between these extremes. Joe is characteristically a critic who “reads” tradition and genre; he will

situate a work in the context of its tradition and genre and illuminate it brilliantly and unexpectedly in that context. One of the central problems of medieval literary scholarship for the last two generations is the issue of the aesthetics of traditional and oral literature, and how and whether one can meaningfully talk about the literary history of an oral genre. Joe's studies of such topics as the Old Norse short narrative (the *þátttr*) or of the Masterbuilder tale in Old Norse literature focus precisely on such problems and offer brilliant readings of specific texts as well as models of literary historical discourse. Again, while there has been a certain ideological dissonance between the study of the Latin and Christian sources of these literatures and the understanding of native, vernacular traditions, Joseph Harris has been ready to bridge that divide since his earliest publications. In this collection, his paper on "Christian Form and Meaning in *Halldór's þátttr I*" illustrates Joe's respect for both approaches.

Perhaps the most important, and indeed the most characteristic, feature of Joseph Harris's scholarship is how hard it is to summarize. His papers run the gamut from critical readings of canonical texts to straightforward philological elucidation of Old Norse or Old English literary works to discussions of larger theoretical issues such as oral theory. What is common to this body of work is the combination of good judgment, critical sensitivity, and deep learning that makes it a model for younger scholars to emulate and a hopeful reminder that there are still some contemporary scholars who can return to quite traditional problems with the judicious authority of such masters as Frederick Klaeber, Kemp Malone, or Sigurður Nordal.

We have gathered this collection of papers to honor a mentor and a friend (and a man who combines both roles effortlessly), and to make the work of Joseph Harris more readily available. "Gleawe men sceolon gieddum wrixlan," as the poet who composed the *Exeter Book* maxims remarked, and if we have made the *gieddas* of Joseph Harris more readily accessible, have made his *spraec* more widely audible, we will have done good work.

The reader will find that we have not tried to impose an absolute uniformity on these reprinted articles, so forms of citation, for example, may vary among them. We have silently corrected such typographical errors as we found in the originals and have updated bibliographic references when necessary. We are immensely grateful

to Patrick J. Stevens, Curator of the Fiske Icelandic Collection at Cornell University, for embracing this volume as part of the Islandica series, and for helping us see it through to completion. Finally, in keeping with the admonition from *Hávamál* that provides the title for this volume, we will now be silent and let the useful words of Joseph Harris speak for themselves.

Susan E. Deskis

Thomas D. Hill